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UNCLAS HANOI 001224

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR PRM AND EAP/BCLTV

GENEVA AND BANGKOK FOR REFCOORD

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: VIETNAM AND UNHCR -- STORM CLOUDS REMAIN

REF: HANOI 1076

11. (SBU) Summary. The GVN continues to blame UNHCR for a role at least in encouraging flights by Montagnards from the Central Highland and insists that the UNHCR staff in Cambodia is "anti-Vietnam." The MFA has yet to agree to an expected visit next week by senior UNHCR officials. While the meeting likely will take place, Embassy is skeptical that it will be productive. End Summary.

12. (SBU) In a conversation with Pol/C at a reception on April 27, MFA Consular Department Director General Bui Dinh Dinh (who has taken the lead on Montagnard and UNHCR issues over the past several years, given this Department's responsibility for the "protection" of Vietnamese nationals) was quite direct in discussing what he claimed was the role of the UNHCR staff in Cambodia in encouraging the flight of Montagnards into Cambodia. (Reftel reports on similar charges cited by AFM Nguyen Duc Hung to Ambassador shortly after the April 10-11 demonstrations.) Dinh claimed that the GVN had "proof" that UNHCR officials in Cambodia had been active along the border offering payments of 500,000 VND (USD 35) to those who tried to cross and another US\$300 payment to those who succeeded. He claimed that the "proof" was detailed as to places, persons, and exact times, and included many instances. He cited these alleged actions as further "proof" of anti-Vietnam policy by UNHCR.

13. (SBU) Pol/C maintained his belief that there was not now nor had ever been any UNHCR policy to USG knowledge to encourage border crossings or to offer payments to Montagnards who tried or succeeded in entering Cambodia. He noted that, even if there may have been private individuals offering assistance or encouragement, the GVN needed to be very cautious in distinguishing between such private acts and UNHCR policy and actions. He stressed that UNHCR had an explicit mandate to examine asylum requests and to aid those determined to have a valid claim to refugee status, and that UNHCR's international reputation for fulfilling its mandate was outstanding. He urged the GVN to be very careful before making such accusations and to refrain from lashing out publicly against such a respected institution. Dinh, noting that he was a trained international lawyer, asserted that UNHCR actions in Cambodia vis-a-vis the Montagnards were in no way consistent with international law.

14. (SBU) Dinh, citing a "lack of goodwill" from UNHCR, added that the MFA had yet to agree to a planned May 3-4 visit to Hanoi by UNHCR Asia Director Fakhouri and Bangkok-based regional director Uktan. (Note: They are scheduled to meet with Ambassador and Pol/C on May 3. End note) Pol/C emphasized that UNHCR's willingness to send such senior officials to Vietnam was itself an act of goodwill, and urged the MFA to proceed with the meetings and re-institute formal dialogue with the UNHCR, as well as to seek ways in which UNHCR could be a part of the solution to the long-standing Montagnard issue. He also urged the GVN to take further steps to improve the situation in the Central Highlands so that the impetus for leaving Vietnam would diminish, and to make local residents less susceptible to any blandishments or encouragement from what the GVN believes are "hostile forces."

15. (SBU) Ambassadors from New Zealand, Australia, Norway, and Switzerland, as well as a group representing UN agencies in Vietnam, are tentatively scheduled to visit the Central Highlands on a GVN-arranged trip during the week of May 10. One expressed concern to Pol/C about the utility of such a trip at this time, and asked for a full read-out after the ongoing trip by US missionoffs.

16. (SBU) Comment: Not for the first time, the GVN prefers to blame outside scapegoats for troubles here. GVN officials have clearly not yet gotten our message to work with UNHCR as part of the solution, and unfortunately still seem bent on proceeding in exactly the opposite direction. We believe that the MFA will in the end agree to see the UNHCR delegation, but predict a stormy session that is likely to be counterproductive.

BURGHARDT